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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001719

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD;
LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09-16-12

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [CE](#) [TH](#) [NO](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lankan government-Tamil Tiger talks
kickoff in Thailand on conciliatory note

Refs: (A) Colombo-Sa/INS 09-16-02 unclass e-mails
- (B) Ops Center/Colombo 09-16-02 telecon
- (C) FBIS Reston Va DTG 160520Z Sep 02
- (D) Colombo 1693, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Charge d'Affaires.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) Summary: The opening ceremony kicking off talks between the GSL and the Tamil Tigers on September 16 was constructive, with both sides making conciliatory remarks. The talks, which are being held at a naval base in Thailand, are now in closed-door session until a closing ceremony and press conference on the afternoon of September 18. Mission continues to hear that this initial round of talks will be more of a get-to-know-you opportunity than substantive in content. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Mission watched the opening ceremony kicking off talks between the Sri Lankan government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) beamed live from Thailand on local TV on September 16. In a positive note, the opening speeches by GSL and LTTE representatives were conciliatory. Norwegian and Thai government representatives also gave brief speeches. After the opening ceremony, the two sides entered into closed-door face-to-face talks with only Norwegian government officials present as facilitators. The closed-door talks are scheduled to continue until September 18 when a closing ceremony and press conference will be held.

3. (U) Per Ref A, Mission has e-mailed SA/INS the texts of speeches given at the opening ceremony. Some of the highlights of these speeches included the following snippets:

-- G.L. Peiris, a senior GSL minister involved in peace process issues, stated, in part: "Our nation has resolved, with a firmness of conviction that has served us well at the most critical moments in our long and eventful history, that a sea change is necessary, now that the tempests have abated. Nothing is as evident in all substantial shades of public opinion in our country today as the unquenchable thirst for peace, dignity, and opportunity for all our people...Despite the color and drama of this event, however, it behooves us to remember that the unfolding panorama of history represents a continuum. President Kumaratunga, soon after her election for the first time eight years ago, committed her government to the goal of peace...We stand unwaveringly for the amplest degree of devolution and for the establishment and strengthening of institutions designed to achieve this purpose. But these reforms must necessarily be effected within the framework of a state whose unity and territorial integrity is ensured in fact and in law by the envisioned structures."

-- Anton Balasingham, the LTTE spokesman, stated, in part: "We (the LTTE) are optimistic that the peace talks will succeed because both Mr. Velupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, and Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, have a genuine and firm will and a firm determination to resolve the conflict through the process of dialogue. As far as the LTTE is concerned, I can assure you that we are seriously and sincerely committed to peace and that we will strive our utmost to ensure the success of the negotiations...Though the leadership of the LTTE had, on several occasions, opted for cessation of hostilities and peace talks, the previous government rejected our conciliatory gestures and intensified the conditions of war that caused heavy loss of life and monumental destruction of Tamil property...The situation has radically changed with the assumption to power of a new government with the overwhelming popular mandate for peace and negotiated political settlement."

-- Vidar Helgesen, Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister, stated, in part: "The government of Norway feels privileged to have the opportunity of facilitating these negotiations, thereby assisting the parties in their

quest for peace. We feel privileged to witness at close range the leadership the parties provide. Trying to bring a long and bitter war to an end through peaceful means, they are sending a powerful message to us. At a time when the world is facing a magnitude of armed conflicts and violent threats, and at a time when the use of armed force is too often predicated as a primary means to address such threats, the parties in Sri Lanka are setting an example for the world."

14. (C) Comment: It may be a sign of the success of the peace process thus far, but most Sri Lankans seem more fixated by the results of a large international cricket tournament taking place in Colombo than what is transpiring in Thailand. In any case, sources in Colombo have told us that both the GSL and the LTTE are satisfied with how the opening ceremony went. There is still no word about the results of this afternoon's closed-door session. Mission continues to hear that this initial round of talks will be more of a get-to-know-you opportunity focusing on assistance-related issues than substantive as to the means to attain a negotiated settlement. End Comment.

15. (U) Minimize considered.

AMSELEM